



Catholic Faith, Life & Creed

Doctrinal Catechesis Sessions for adults based on
the Church Year, the Liturgy, & the Sunday Scriptures

Breaking Open the Word

by Mary Birmingham

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time A



Parable of the Pearl of Great Price



Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Opening Prayer

Option 1. Use Opening Prayer from the Sunday Liturgy.

Option 2.

Oblatio Sui

Lord, take all my freedom.

Accept my memory,

my understanding,

And my entire will.

You have given me all that I have or hold dear.

I return it to you,

that it may be governed by your will.

Give me only your grace

and the gift of loving you,

And I will be rich enough;

I will ask for nothing more.

Amen.

Catholic
**Faith, Life
& Creed**
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Breaking Open the
Word worksheets
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Faith, Life, & Creed*
Doctrinal Sessions.

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Liturgical Context

- ▶ Today we hear the last of Jesus' parables in chapter thirteen of Matthew's Gospel.
- ▶ Today's gospel is a reminder that our highest goal should be to seek, live and promote the reign of God. There is no greater treasure.
- ▶ Recognizing its great value, the truly wise person will seek the reign of God above all else in life.
- ▶ Whether we stumble upon it or seek it in earnest, once we have the kingdom within our grasp we should move heaven and earth to keep it active in our lives—never let it go.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, and then surface insights in the wider group.

- ▶ What spoke to your heart in today's liturgy?
- ▶ What reading, symbol, music, homily, spoke to you and why did it speak to you?
- ▶ What touched you the most in today's Gospel?

If time is a consideration, omit reflection on one of the readings.

First Reading: 1 Kings 3: 5, 7-12

- ▶ King Solomon was upheld as a paragon of wisdom. His wisdom is exalted as worthy of praise in today's reading.
- ▶ Solomon was a great leader, architect, builder and businessman.
- ▶ Today's reading gives us insight into how he achieved such wisdom.
- ▶ He asked God in a dream to gift him with wisdom above all other gifts.
- ▶ He sought wisdom even before riches or a long life.
- ▶ The ultimate conclusion one can draw is that wisdom is the most important treasure to acquire in life. All other pursuits fail in comparison.
- ▶ A wise person reflects upon the word of God and seeks to do God's will above all else. Such reflection provides necessary confidence and assurance in God's revelation.
- ▶ Solomon was aware of his own weakness and thus knew he needed God's wisdom as his own paled in comparison. God is pleased with such humility.



Mystagogy reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in groups of two, and then surface brief insights in the wider group. Catechist responds with a "brief" story from his or her life.

- ▶ What is the Good News in this reading?
- ▶ Have you ever known a person as humble as Solomon? What qualities does that person possess?
- ▶ What evidence is there in your own life that you have been gifted with God's wisdom?
- ▶ What are the implications when a person is lacking in wisdom? In other words, why is this gift so important?

Second Reading: Romans 8: 28-30

- ▶ Paul continues to present his catechism on human suffering.
- ▶ He reminds his people that suffering is transitory and is nothing in comparison with the joy that awaits us.
- ▶ Paul reminds us that life's defeats will result in transformation and vindication.
- ▶ Today's reading praises the glory of the cross and the redemption that was won by Christ's victory over the cross.
- ▶ Christians can be assured that all will be well through the power of the cross. No suffering can minimize the hope and joy we share in the resurrection.
- ▶ Christians not only look forward in hope to the future glory but they are heirs to that same glory here and now when they join their lives to the cross and resurrection of Christ.
- ▶ Paul reminds us that human beings are made in the image of God. Genesis reminds us that God created men and women and he created them in his image. God saw that his creation was "good."
- ▶ God elevated human beings to the status of divine through the Incarnation of his Son. We are conformed to his image. We are in the image of Christ who is the image of God.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in groups of two and then surface brief insights in the wider group. Catechist responds with a "brief" story or reflection from his or her life.

- ▶ How can we appropriate Paul's message in our lives today? What are the implications of what Paul is teaching the Romans?
- ▶ What does it mean to you that God elevated human beings to the status of divine through the Incarnation? What are the implications of this truth for Christian living?
- ▶ Describe the ways in which you encounter the divine in the saints of God—the disciples you know—as well as in yourself. What evidence is there that God elevated human beings to the status of divine? In what way is this a concrete reality that has anything to do with our lives and not such some wonderful, pious sentiment?
- ▶ Have you ever experienced peace and joy in the face of suffering? What are the implications of this Christian truth for our lives? What possible obstacles get in the way of this peace and joy?

Gospel: Matthew 13:44-52

Read or summarize the Gospel, perhaps provide a copy of the text for further reflection.

Gospel Exegesis

Please note: catechist may intersperse the questions at the end of the exegesis throughout your presentation where appropriate.) Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions before presenting the exegesis.

- ▶ What specifically touched you in this Gospel?
- ▶ What does this Gospel mean to you?

- ▶ Today's Gospel continues Jesus' catechism on the reign of God of the past few weeks.
- ▶ The reign of God is a prized possession. Once found, every effort must be made to treasure and safeguard it.
- ▶ Today's Gospel exhorts us to seek what is truly important in this life.
- ▶ Solomon reminds us that wisdom is the greatest treasure. If we possess the Wisdom of Solomon we would know that seeking the reign of God is greatest priority in life.
- ▶ Seeking the wisdom of God is and remains the greatest treasure—the pearl of great price. God's wisdom is where our hope lies.
- ▶ Jesus is so insistent on the inherent value of wisdom that he uses negative human behavior to illustrate how important it is. People would even cheat to hang on to it.
- ▶ Jesus used the power of illustration and story to communicate the importance of this great prize. He could have simply stated how important it is to seek wisdom—a true statement but hardly memorable.
- ▶ Jesus, in his wisdom, used exaggerated metaphors to help people stop, take notice, ponder, appropriate and above all remember how important the truth he is trying to communicate truly is.
- ▶ Consider the analogy. I could simply state that wisdom is the greatest priority in life. My statement is true; it sounds very pious and very *nice*. If, however, I were to state that wisdom is so important that even if it was located under armed guard at the Pentagon, it would be worth the risk to do whatever it takes to retrieve it. Both statements would be true; wisdom is that important. The second statement however, drives home the point in story and metaphor thus grabbing the attention of the listener in ways not possible with a mere statement of truth.
- ▶ Jesus uses human behavior, sometimes bizarre and eccentric human behavior, to teach us the truths of the kingdom.
- ▶ The pearl of great price affirms the necessity of taking great pains to secure the greatest priority in life.
- ▶ Matthew's Jesus was speaking to a Jewish community. The Matthean community was experiencing the influences of heresy, false teaching, immorality and persecution.
- ▶ Christians must resist the temptation to succumb to such pressures if they wish to become true heirs of eternal life.
- ▶ The parable of the treasure and the pearl of great price illustrate the human response to God's gratuitous initiative.

- ▶ The important principle is not the *seeking* portion of the response. A person can innocently come upon it or they can conscientiously pursue it. The point of the parable is what one does with the pearl once it is found.
- ▶ Jesus insists that it cannot be purchased or earned; it is freely given.
- ▶ The reign of God is not a commodity for purchase.
- ▶ We enter it, live it, celebrate it, promote it and witness to it with the sacrifice of our lives.
- ▶ The reign of God is reality here and now as we await the reign of God in the hereafter. Righteous living in the reign of God is rehearsal for our eternal life with God in heaven.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions.

- ▶ If the Bible and the Church teaches that we are living in the reign of God, what does that mean to you?
- ▶ In what way are you living in and participating in the kingdom of God right now?

Parable of the Dragnet.

- ▶ The parable of the dragnet reminds us of our final destination.
- ▶ God will judge every person at the end of time.
- ▶ Our final destination depends on the choices we make on this side of the kingdom—how we lived our lives.
- ▶ Again Jesus used an image from the lived experience of first century Palestinians.
- ▶ When a fisherman hauls in a huge catch he brings the entire catch to shore before he separates the trash picked up in the nets from the good fish.
- ▶ The metaphor of dragnet is a reminder that everyone is subject to judgment. God will gather and judge the just alongside the unjust.
- ▶ The bottom line when it comes to today's parables is the posture Christians are to embrace. Christians are to be decisive, resourceful, creative, conscientious and willing to risk everything in their lives for the sake of the kingdom.
- ▶ When one stumbles upon the kingdom it is a surprise. No one sought after God's reign in today's parable. The field hand made his discovery by chance.
- ▶ The parables remind us that when the reign of God comes crashing into our lives it comes bringing great joy.
- ▶ When we encounter it we are to embrace it, invest in it and commit to it.
- ▶ The price is high. Absolutely everything was sold in the parable in order to purchase the field indicating that whatever was sold was worthless in comparison to the great prize.
- ▶ Everyone who leaves all attachments behind (human and material) to follow Christ, gain their lives in the process.

- ▶ Jesus asked the disciples if they understood what he was asking of them.
- ▶ He was asking for more than intellectual assent. He was asking for complete and total submission of their hearts and wills to God.
- ▶ Submission of this kind is observed by discernable criteria. There will be evidence in the person's life to the extent he or she has entered the kenosis and detachment required to be a true disciple.
- ▶ If we commit to the kingdom as today's parable suggests, there are serious implications. If we give up everything in our lives to acquire the kingdom, then we must do the same thing in order to live according to its values and ethics.
- ▶ A discernable criterion as to whether a given church community is living according to the principles of the reign of God is to determine the way in which that community reaches out to the marginalized members among them.
- ▶ Communities that reach out to the poor, suffering, homeless, oppressed and marginalized members of society are communities that have found the pearl of great price and are living according to its principles.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in small groups of four. Use the last three or four minutes to surface the insights in the wider group. Catechist begins by sharing story from his or her life. See appendix for an example.

- ▶ What is the one ultimate theme in this Gospel? How does Jesus emphasize that theme?
- ▶ What are you being asked to leave behind in your quest for Jesus?
- ▶ When you consider your own life, what is your pearl of great price? What is the most important thing in your life that you will stop at nothing to secure, care for, or get?
- ▶ What do you think Jesus is telling us when he insists that the reign of God is like a pearl of great price? What does that tell you about the way you should live your Christian life?
- ▶ What discernable evidence in there in your community that it is living according to the values of the kingdom. When have you observed Christian communities not living according to the principles of the kingdom?
- ▶ What does this Gospel teach us about God's relationship with us?
- ▶ What does this Gospel teach us about the Christian mission?

Catechist invites participants to silently reflect on the following question.

- ▶ After reflection on today's liturgy, what one thing is God asking of you at this time in your life?
- ▶ What obstacles stand in the way of following God's call?

Concluding Prayer

Repeat OPENING PRAYER for this session OR

Minor rite: Blessing: 95-97.

APPENDIX

► What are you being asked to leave behind in your quest for Jesus?

I know that God is inviting me to trust in ways I have never trusted before. This coming week I am being given the precious gift of life. My son is giving me his kidney. My kidneys have slowly deteriorated and without his gift the only thing that will keep me alive aside from dialysis is his precious gift.

This has been an emotional journey that has required ongoing kenosis on my part. This kenosis has only been possible through the Spirit who prays within me as Paul reminds us in today's second reading. It is only through the intervention of the Holy Spirit that I have undertaken this journey in complete trust and abandonment. Every temptation to worry, fear, or wonder about the outcome has been met by that small still voice that groans within me to remind me that God is in control of my life. I am simply called to let go and let him love me.

I approach this surgery with acceptance of God's will no matter the outcome. This is nothing less than pure grace and gratuitous gift.

The doctor told me that the turn of events is nothing short of miraculous. He had never known the timing of such events to fit so neatly together. My kidneys failed just as everything was put in place to receive a new one. He told me that he has never experienced such perfect timing. I told him that that is what one can expect when the Christian community gathers for prayer. It is a testament to God's presence and the truth that God is in control of this situation. I need only relax and trust in his healing, loving kindness.

The pearl of great price is God's incredible love and manifestation. I am called to leave doubt, mistrust and fear in the dust. The Spirit has gifted me with the ability to abandon my life into God's care.



Connecting Liturgy with Catholic Doctrine

Possible doctrinal themes that flow from this week's
Liturgy of the Word and Eucharist

Liturgical Year
Scripture and Revelation
Salvation/Soteriology
Kingdom of God

Creed
Eschatology
Faith

Other themes may be chosen as well--choose from the scope and sequence chart and create your own connecting statement. The following statements make the appropriate connections between the doctrinal issue you have chosen and the liturgy of the day.

LITURGICAL YEAR

It is appropriate to revisit the importance of the liturgical year at various times during the liturgical cycle. The entire mystery of Christ from his incarnation, life, death, resurrection, ascension to the Father and the sending of the Holy Spirit is manifested in one complete liturgical year. It is thus appropriate that today we address what the Church teaches about the LITURGICAL YEAR.

SCRIPTURE AND REVELATION I or II

According to the sage in the Book of Kings one develops a wise, focused heart by being attentive to God's word—God's law. One can rest securely in God's providential care as a result of meditation on God's divine revelation. The Gospel is the revelation of God's righteousness—righteousness that he invites us to imitate. God continues to reveal himself to us through Divine Revelation, the Word of God. It is most fitting that our doctrinal session today will address SCRIPTURE AND REVELATION I or II.

SALVATION/SOTERIOLOGY

The Gospel reminds us that when we are finally introduced to the reign of God we should do nothing to keep us from possessing it. We are saved by God's initiative. Our response is to cooperate with his saving grace. We are reminded that God has set his plan of salvation in motion from the beginning. It comes to fulfillment in Jesus Christ and his saving mission. It is thus appropriate that we focus our doctrinal session on what the Church teaches about SALVATION/SOTERIOLOGY.

KINGDOM OF GOD

Jesus presents the blue print for living a reciprocal relationship with his Father. Jesus is establishing his kingdom—he is Christ the teacher as well as Christ the Savior. He reminds us that the kingdom is the pearl of great price that we should seek after no matter the cost. It is most fitting that today's extended session focuses on what the Church teaches about the KINGDOM OF GOD.

CREED

Jesus presents us with a blueprint for living life in the kingdom of God. Our response is to consider the kingdom a pearl of great price that we should seek and safeguard with our entire heart and soul. When we live according to the norms of the kingdom, we are strengthened to embrace the Christian life—to willingly die for the sake of the Gospel—to die for the sake of what we believe is righteous. St. Augustine told us that there are five things we must believe—the Sacraments, the Lord's Prayer, the Beatitudes, the Ten Commandments and the Creed. If we are to live in the kingdom Christ came to establish, then we must be ready to profess our faith at the cost of our own lives. Upon what, then, are we to stake our lives? The answer should be the CREED we profess in every Eucharistic liturgy. Thus today we will focus our attention on the hallmark of our Christian faith—the NICENE CREED.

ESCHATOLOGY: HEAVEN, HELL AND PURGATORY.

The parable of the dragnet is a reminder that we will all be judged at the end of life. It is thus appropriate that we focus our attention on end things, the end of times and the after-life. Today's doctrinal session will focus on ESCHATOLOGY: HEAVEN, HELL AND PURGATORY.

FAITH

The only way one can truly appreciate all that the kingdom of God has to offer is through eyes of faith. Once a person has faith in Christ and the kingdom he came to establish he or she would risk everything to keep it. This is only possible if that person has deep conversion of heart—if that person has faith. It is thus appropriate that today's liturgy invites us to reflect on what the Church teaches about FAITH.